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Nonstandard Phonological Configurations in the Westray Dialect: Maintenance or Decline?
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A major question in sociodialectological research today concerns the future of isolated nonstandard dialects in the face of encroaching standard varieties. While research demonstrating the continuing divergence of mainstream English dialects suggests that increasing homogeneity is not actually the norm as commonly assumed (for example, Labov, Ash & Boberg, 2006), the fate of more peripheral dialects is not so secure. As Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1995) argue compellingly, it is in the interest of students of language change to identify and investigate declining dialects as a critical piece of the language change puzzle. The dialect spoken in Orkney, an archipelago off the northern tip of Scotland, seems a likely candidate. The Orkney dialect, one of two major subdialects of Insular Scots, has been largely protected from outside influences due to Orkney's relative insularity. Rapid social, demographic, and technological changes in recent decades, however, have created the potential for dialect loss. Orkney thus provides an ideal testing ground for hypotheses about dialect contact and decline, yet it has been studied only from a descriptive standpoint.

The current study will begin to fill that gap by focusing on one of Orkney's more remote islands, Westray. Following the model of Wolfram and his students' work on the Outer Banks dialects of North Carolina (for example, Wolfram, Hazen, & Schilling-Estes, 1999), I seek to apply the methods and insights of the variationist paradigm to find out whether the Orkney dialect is indeed declining under the obvious pressures towards standardization. Such a question necessarily extends beyond the scope of a single paper, but as a starting point I will look specifically at the BEAT lexical class. The available literature does not agree on the status of this vowel. Orten reports a full merger of MEET and BEAT (1991), whereas Johnston (1997) reports, based on data from the Linguistic Atlas of Scotland (Mather & Speitel, 1986), that BEAT is merged with MATE and BAIT. Millar (2007) expands Johnston's report to include BET and parts of MEET in an expansive front vowel merger. This study asks what the phonological status of BEAT is in Westray and whether or not this status is changing as might be expected.

Digitally-recorded sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with 27 native Westray residents balanced for age and sex. The interviews included the reading of a word list, elicitation of demographic information, and guided conversation. Word list data was analyzed by ear for nucleus and glide quality, then normalized and subjected to spectrographic analysis in Praat. Pilot data from minimal pair tests, in which participants were asked to read aloud minimal pairs and judge whether the words sound "the same" or "different," was also included. During the interviews, I asked participants to speak as they normally would in conversation but did not specify the interlocuter, whereas during the minimal pair tests, I asked them to reflect on the words as they would pronounce them when speaking with family or friends.

The results indicate that, contrary to previous findings in Orkney, BEAT may traditionally be merged with BET but not with MATE. Furthermore, this pattern appears to be at least variably present in even the young speakers' word list data, although many instances of

BEAT pronounced as MEET are evident as well. The available minimal pair data suggests that systematic deviations from the Westray configuration in the word list data may in fact stem not from standardization over time but rather from interlocuter identity. If indeed the use of a standard BEAT-MEET merger is the result of code-switching, it would imply that the Westray dialect, far from being moribund, is, at least phonologically, quite robust. The question that remains for further research is how speakers of a dialect with a BEAT-BET merger can effortlessly code-switch to a more standard variety in which these classes are separate.

References

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